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SUBJECT: ELN-GOC TALKS HAVE SOME CHANCE OF SUCCESS

REF: A) BOGOTA 10992

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The meeting between the GOC and the ELN in Cuba next week is the first formal encounter between them in almost four years and should be considered a breakthrough, but few are optimistic success will come easily. The talks will be exploratory with an open agenda, assisted by Norway, Spain and Switzerland, the group of civil society guarantors of the Casa de Paz initiative, and three notable Colombians. The first meeting only will be in Cuba, and focus on a schedule for future sessions. Subsequent meetings would likely take place in Europe. The ELN leadership reportedly settled on Cuba rather than risk legal jeopardy in Europe, given their designated status as a terrorist organization. Cuba will have no substantive role other than host. Moritz Akerman, one of the five civil society guarantors, believes that ELN spokesperson Francisco Galan's consultations with civil society over the last three months and weekly informal encounters with Peace Commissioner Restrepo, led directly to next week's meeting. He also claims that the ELN decided a year ago to move from war to politics, and to distance itself from the FARC. Others believe military, political and social losses have driven the ELN to the negotiating table along with the recognition that it would not survive another four years with Uribe. Most GOC officials and Colombian analysts see a limited chance for success, expressing concern about the lack of substantive preparations and ELN dissatisfaction with Restrepo, for starters. Some believe that the FARC is allowing a process that could isolate them go forward because it has struck a deal with the ELN over the scope and content of negotiations, including wanting the ELN to test the waters on the prospects for negotiating a demilitarized zone, a demand the FARC continues to insist upon before entering into its own negotiations with the GOC. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Next week's meeting in Havana between Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo and the ELN's military commander of the National Liberation Army (ELN) "Antonio Garcia" and Spokesman "Francisco Galan" is an important step forward in the peace process. Galan has reported to the press that talks will be exploratory and the agenda open. GOC officials, including Restrepo and President Uribe's communications director Jaime Bermudez, confirm that the

encounter, the first formal meeting between the GOC and a guerrilla group since 2002, will be to discuss prospects for future meetings, an itinerary toward negotiations, and nothing more. Representatives from Norway (including Bogota-based charge Sigurd Endresen), Spain (including Deputy Chief of Mission Pablo Gomez de Olea Bustinaza, and Switzerland (including Ambassador Thomas Kupfer) will travel to Havana at the request of the GOC and ELN. The group of five guarantors (Moritz Akerman, Daniel Garcia-Pena, Alvaro Jimenez, Gustavo Ruiz and Alejo Vargas) overseeing consultations between Galan and civil society since October will also attend, along with Rafael Santos (of the Bogota daily El Tiempo), Marta Senn (director of cultural affairs for Bogota, representing Mayor Garzon), and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (the Nobel prize winning Colombian novelist). Gomez de Olea told polcouns on December 6 that only the first meeting would be held in Havana. (According to press reports, the meeting will take place on Monday, December 12. Restrepo adviser Eduardo Herrera said on December 9 that the meeting would take place in two phases: December 12-15 for organizational details, and December 16-22 for the formal session). Subsequent meetings, if any, would likely take place in Norway, Spain or Switzerland. Gomez de Olea noted that, with the ELN designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the EU, the ELN leadership resisted traveling to Europe for the first encounter, fearing arrest. Even traveling to non-EU Norway or Switzerland would have required transit through an EU capital. GOC and Spanish officials have also confirmed that the Cuban government is only serving as host and expected to have no substantive role in the talks. That said, Fidel Castro reportedly pressed the ELN hard, in particular Antonio Garcia, to go forward with the meeting. Details on how ELN leaders will be escorted to Cuba remain unclear. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) refused the job.

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WHY IS THE PROCESS MOVING FORWARD?  
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13. (C) Moritz Akerman, an alternative GOC-ELN conduit over the years and one of the five guarantors of recent discussions between Galan and civil society (known as the Casa de Paz initiative), told polcouns recently that Galan's consultations have directly contributed to next week's meeting in Havana. According to Akerman, the ELN has been surprised by universal calls from civil society interlocutors to abandon violence and kidnapping and move to political dialogue. He noted that Restrepo and Galan have been meeting on a weekly basis since early November, and this has helped both men define each other and the issues more clearly. The result has been an amiable relationship engendering "new confidence." Both also understand the limits of each others' positions. Akerman also said the ELN now understands that they have to deal with the GOC, and more specifically with Uribe. As a result of the constitutional court's decision on re-election, there is no going around him. On the other side, the GOC now understands that the conduit to the COCE has to be Galan. COCE designated him to engage with civil society and has been sending him daily instructions. The problem with the COCE in the past, according to Akerman, was that their "digestion of information was very slow." He claimed that the ELN leadership made the decision to move from war to politics in October 2004, and that this was ratified by COCE commanders in January 2005. The problem since then was that they could not figure out how to "get from there to here."

14. (C) Akerman speculated that one of the reasons Mexican facilitation efforts failed last Spring was disagreement (and alleged fighting) among the COCE about the ELN's posture toward the FARC. "They were not sure what to do with them," he said. Akerman stressed that Galan has reached the conclusion that the FARC is now the enemy and has done more damage to the ELN than Colombian military forces. Akerman acknowledged that this view is still not shared by the entire ELN leadership.

15. (C) Member of the Catholic Church's National Reconciliation Commission and former Pastrana Administration peace negotiator Ernesto Borda, who also met recently with Galan, is harsher regarding ELN motives for negotiations, but agrees that its posture toward the FARC has changed. Borda told policons on December 1 that the ELN is a shadow of its former self, trying to salvage what little it has left. Borda claimed that the ELN has suffered significant military and political losses, and whatever remaining social bases are diminishing rapidly. Borda said the ELN has reached the conclusion that they would disappear with four more years of Uribe, and that the ELN leadership has decided to break the "umbilical cord" with the FARC. Eduardo Herrera from the Peace Commissioner's office agreed, telling polcons on December 9 that the ELN pressed hard for this December encounter, instead of beginning in January as had been previously discussed.

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LIMITED CHANCE OF SUCCESS  
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16. (C) Think tank Ideas para la Paz director Sergio Jaramillo remains skeptical that next week's encounter will lead to much. (Ideas para la Paz has served as the technical secretariat for the Casa de Paz initiative over the last

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three months.) In his view, the process is moving too quickly and little has been done substantively to prepare for talks which could quickly breakdown once discussions moved beyond meeting planning. Ernesto Borda agrees, underscoring his view that the only way talks will succeed is if results are pre-negotiated and pre-cooked before anyone sat down at the negotiating table. The ELN has also been complaining about Restrepo. Jaramillo and others in contact with Galan, have noted that, while now accepting the likely reality of Uribe serving a second term, the ELN spokesman has been telling civil society interlocutors that he detests Restrepo and was considering demanding another GOC interlocutor be named. Father Ray Schamback, a Colombian-US dual national and Catholic priest who has negotiated with the guerrillas and paras the release of over 60 hostages, is more pessimistic, insisting that the process with the ELN is nothing more than a place holder for both sides. For the GOC, any ongoing process is a win, and for the ELN "it just keeps them in the game," he said. Attitudes have not changed. The ELN has also publicly refused to accept the Law for Justice and Peace as a legal framework for whatever demobilization might occur.

17. (C) A skeptical Vice President Santos is maintaining a wait and see attitude, telling the DCM recently that the ELN has been and will most likely continue to be unpredictable and erratic, making it impossible to know what will happen in Havana or beyond.

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WHY IS THE FARC ALLOWING THIS TO GO FORWARD?  
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18. (C) There is much speculation in GOC, think tank/analyst, and journalist circles about how much influence the FARC has over the ELN and why the former would allow a process that could leave them isolated on the battle field, further legitimize the peace process and demobilization with the paramilitaries, and deliver a significant win for Uribe. It is all well and good for Galan to tell civil society interlocutors that the FARC is the enemy and that COCE wants to break the umbilical cord, but does the ELN really have a choice.

19. (C) National Reconciliation Commission Secretary General Father Dario Echeverri told Congressional staffer Tim Rieser on December 7 that he believes the ELN has an agreement with the FARC to discuss only humanitarian issues associated with landmines with the GOC, not substantive peace talks. Echeverri also subscribes to the theory making the rounds in

Bogota that the FARC may be using the ELN to test the waters on prospects for negotiating a demilitarized zone ("despeje") with the GOC, hoping to take advantage of such a development in its own subsequent dealings with the government. Should the GOC turn the idea down, the FARC would move to sabotage the talks or inflict further damage on the ELN. The FARC continues to insist that it is amenable to a humanitarian exchange only if/if the GOC agrees to a demilitarized zone.

¶10. (C) Ambassador met with the civil society guarantors on December 9. He expressed strong U.S. support for the process, but also laid down markers related to ending violence, returning kidnap victims, Cuba, and the Justice and Peace Law. See septel.  
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